

# **Land conflicts and Southern Africa's new narratives since Zimbabwe's fast-track land reform.**

Alden, C.<sup>1</sup> & Anseeuw, W.<sup>2</sup>

1) London School of Economics, Department of International Relations, [J.C.Alden@lse.ac.uk](mailto:J.C.Alden@lse.ac.uk)

2) CIRAD Associate Researcher, Post Graduate School for Agriculture and Rural  
Development, University of Pretoria, [Ward.Anseeuw@up.ac.za](mailto:Ward.Anseeuw@up.ac.za)  
(Corresponding author)

**REFERENCE :** ALDEN, C & ANSEEUEW, W. (2011). Land conflicts and Southern Africa's new narratives since Zimbabwe's fast-track land reform. Pretoria, ISS Conference "land and human security in Africa", 30-31 Mai 2011, Conference paper, 14p.

## *Abstract:*

The interplay between a regional system based on colonial settler communities and the cycles of conflict, resistance and reaction which gave rise to African oppositions and liberation movements, was characterised by two dominant narratives that were set against each other and shaped the politics of post-independent societies. The first is a *black liberation narrative*, claims its legitimacy in its historical opposition to colonialism with special emphasis on the peasantry. The second is a *neoliberal narrative*, emerging out of the transition, reflects the political compromises made by elites to gain independence with the new forces of capital – mainly globalisation – and its accompanying world order.

Nevertheless, since 2000 and more particularly since Zimbabwe's fast-track land reform, new tendencies, new narratives and new norms have mushroomed. Social movements emerged, new narratives are developing, and new relationships with Zimbabwe are developed. Each of these new developments and narratives become influential sources of policy and political action in the present, post-2000 period and become central to the local and regional responses to the Zimbabwean crisis. Based on empirical evidence from Zimbabwe's neighbouring countries, the objective of the paper will be to gain an understanding into the nature of narratives development concerning land, not only at national level but at the broader African state system as well and the degree to which the latter challenge new norms of governance of state.

**Keywords:** Southern Africa, land, politics of land, narratives, norms, regionalisation

## *Résumé:*

L'interaction entre un système régional fondé sur les communautés de colon et les cycles du conflit, de la résistance et de la réaction qui ont donné lieu à des oppositions africaines et des mouvements de libération, a produit deux discours dominants à ancrage racial important qui se sont confrontés et qui ont esquissé les politiques des sociétés post-indépendantes. Le premier, le récit de libération noire, qui réclame sa légitimité dans son opposition historique au colonialisme avec une considération particulière concernant la paysannerie. Le deuxième est un discours néo-libéral, émergeant de la transition, qui reflète les compromis politiques dans lesquels s'est engagé l'élite, avec le capital dans un contexte global nouveau - principalement la globalisation.

Néanmoins, depuis 2000 et plus particulièrement depuis la réforme foncière *fast-track* du Zimbabwe, de nouvelles tendances, de nouveaux discours et de nouvelles normes sont apparus. Des mouvements sociaux ont émergé, de nouveaux discours se développent et de nouveaux rapports avec le Zimbabwe sont développés. Chacun de ces nouveaux développements et discours deviennent des sources influentes de politiques et d'action politique dans l'actuel période post-2000 et deviennent centraux aux réponses locales et régionales à la crise zimbabwéenne. Basé sur des évidences empiriques des pays voisins du Zimbabwe, l'objectif du papier est de mieux comprendre la nature de développement des discours au sujet de la terre, non seulement au niveau national mais également au niveau d'un système d'Etats africains plus large, et le degré d'impactes ceux-ci ont sur les nouvelles normes de gouvernance d'Etat.

Mots-clefs : Afrique australe, terre, politiques foncières, discours, normes, régionalisation

(Number of words of paper : 5971, without references)

*“If the perception is that of Europeans, well, I suppose you are right to say my reputation has gone down. But in terms of Africa, go anywhere and I am a hero.”* (Mugabe’s answer when he was asked if the land invasions hadn’t damaged his image, September 2002).

Indeed, Mugabe and his lieutenants win ovations across Africa: at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, at the summit of the Southern African SADC trade bloc in August 2003, or when the re-elected Mbeki government was sworn in in 2004 at the union Buildings in Pretoria. Mugabe is *“speaking for black people worldwide”*, writes the South African journalist Harry Mashabela (2002). Writing in the Helen Suzman Foundation’s September newsletter, Mashabela pointed to the adoration Mugabe won: *‘The applause and standing ovations were a tacit expression of appreciation of the courageous stand Mugabe has taken in trying to resolve the critical land problems facing his country.’* (Hartley, 2003).

Southern Africa was once seen as a region that was thought of as Africa’s emerging democratic bastion, where multiparty pluralism had transcended the politics of racial exclusion and new leaders had firmly committed themselves to market economies and reconciliation. From a scholarly perspective, expectations drawn from the study of democratisation in Africa suggest that of all the forms of regime transformations on the continent, it is former settler oligarchies that are supposed to be most likely to be able to consolidate the gains of democracy (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994). The transition would, according to these scholars, be essentially one of extension of the franchise to formally excluded groups, which is in effect contiguous to the process of consolidation. The task of nation-building therefore becomes primarily one focused on reconciliation in the aftermath of conflict. Issues of citizenship, economic distribution and even competing versions of history are all subsumed within the normal pattern of inclusive multiparty politics.

Nevertheless, Zimbabwe’s crisis, precipitated by a government-orchestrated campaign of violence against white farmers and an urban-based black opposition movement, offers a number of challenges to these conventional wisdoms on democratic transitions in Africa. Zimbabwe turned from one of Africa’s miracles into a country where anarchy, undemocratic practices and poverty have become the main feature. In addition, Zimbabwe’s slide into anarchy has found echoes in the rise in local militancy on the land issue in neighbouring states, coupled to the apparent chorus of support for Zimbabwe’s president by fellow Southern Africa leaders, and has recast the region as a repository of instability. Since 2000

and more particularly since Zimbabwe's fast-track land reform, social movements emerged (Landless People's Movement in South Africa), new narratives are developing (anti-imperialist movements, "who is African" debates) and new relationships with Zimbabwe are developed (the Namibian case in particular).

The paper will present a deeper insight into the development of these new – often conflicting – narratives, identities and land issues. It will seek to examine and analyse the role of land as a site and source of new narratives and norms. Being comparative in nature within the Southern African region, the objective will be to gain insight into the nature of narratives development concerning land, not only at national level but at the broader African state system as well and the degree to which the latter challenge new norms of governance of state and frame the parameters of political debate and policy development. The first part of the paper details narrative discourse into the theoretical landscape as a way of capturing the societal dimensions. The second part introduces the historically existing narratives, developed through the interplay between a regional system based on colonial settler communities and African oppositions and liberation movements, that were set against each other and shaped the narratives and politics of post-independent societies. This deliberately historicised approach, which recognises the constitutive role of norms in the formation of institutions and institutional practice, will lead in the third and last part to the description and explanation of the new developments and narratives concerning land, how they become influential sources of policy and political action and become central to the local and regional responses to the Zimbabwean crisis in the present, post-2000 period.

## **1. FROM THE DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVES AND NORMS TO POLICY**

Narratives are understood to be broad renderings of events that contain and convey meaning as well as having specific political context for communities in the form of discourses. Discourses are 'not simply ideas, but are also the actions, thoughts and practices that make that idea "a reality" by structuring and delineating reality and thereby making it knowable' (Dunn, 2001, p.56). Narrative and discourse are important interpretative devices to this article precisely because they acknowledge deep historical process and subjectivity as integral to social and institutional formations. The place of narrative and discourse is especially important in the context of weakly legitimated states as countervailing societally based sources of authenticity and authority. They introduce alternative accounts of history and communities' relationship to the state or state-practice that can challenge the prevailing

official narrative<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, in the context of societies, the use of narratives explains the saliency of ideas, memories and social custom that cut across the boundaries of the state, resonating with communities beyond the sovereign divide<sup>2</sup>.

By way of contrast, the language of norms appears in this account in so far as it relates to the concerns of the institutionalisation of transnational ideas that emerge out of narratives and are ultimately made explicit in a particular set of formal and informal governing practices (Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986). Norms, defined as ‘a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity’, frame the parameters of policy debate on given issues and concurrently introduce constraints to decision making as well as, under certain circumstances, changes in actor preferences (Krasner, 1983, p.2). It is the constitutive dimension of norms, namely, those norms which introduce new interests or categories of action that are reflected in new (or reformed) institutions as well as empowering new (non-state) actors to partake in policy making. Transitions to democracy typically introduce new norms and/or transform extant institutions through an extension of membership and tasks or the means through which tasks are pursued (Aggarwal, 1998; Gill, 2000).

Following Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), new democratic norms enter the realm of policy debate within the context of pre-established norms. Norm entrepreneurs’ attempts to introduce new ideas are mediated through the standards of ‘appropriateness’ linked to these existing norms and hold greater possibility of effectiveness when they can be seen to resonate with the former. The diffusion of democratic norms follows a pattern (‘life cycle’) characterised by norm emergence, a ‘tipping point’, norm cascade and ultimately norm internalisation by state actors. The tipping point or threshold is especially important as it is the moment when a sufficient number of states as well as influential states have accepted the norm, thus paving the way for general acceptance by all (or nearly so) states in regional or international system (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). Conflicts between norms are also subject to exogenous shocks (‘world time context’), which can act to discredit one constellation of norms and thus allowing another to replace it within the norm hierarchy. In Southern Africa, the discrediting of racial narratives that informed settler colonialism played a crucial role in undermining support for settler oligarchies both internationally and domestically as did the collapse of communism in paving the way for transitions to democracy.

---

<sup>1</sup> Werbner (1998) speaks of these ‘popular counter-memorialisations’ that produced ‘unfinished narratives: in which the past is perceived to be unfinished, festering in the present...’.

<sup>2</sup> Mozaffar *et al.* (2003) make this argument with respect to poorly understood or legitimated electoral institutions in emerging African democracies.

The motivation for acceptance of new norms by state actors is important to consider as well. According to Finnemore and Sikkink, governing elites respond to norms when their legitimacy is threatened, when prominent states abide by a particular norm, for the intrinsic (usually universalistic) qualities of the norm, adjacency claims to existing norms and the aforementioned impact of the world time context. Gourevitch (1978) and Risse-Kappen (1994) tell us that domestic structures and state-societal relations are key determinants of norm acceptance: in this context, the problematic of transnational norm diffusion in non-Western settings needs to be recognised. Acharya (2003) notes that socio-cultural factors such as belief systems influence the degree to which resistance, adaptation and adoption, or replacement strategies are employed by local actors in Southeast Asia. Narratives rooted in social structures and practices dictate the degree to which international norms are subjected to 'localisation' and transformation when absorbed within non-Western states. In particular, the gap between an international interpretation of the acceptance of a norm through, for example, formal adherence through treaties or establishment of institutions and the local understanding may be considerable. Moreover, instrumentalism, as well as conformity to pre-existing norms, should be seen as a rationale for norm localisation that carries within it the seeds of future conflict. Cortell and Davis (1996, p.453) observe that 'governmental officials and societal actors can invoke an international rule to further their own particularist interests in domestic policy debates.'

## **2. FROM LIBERATION TO NEO-LIBERAL NARRATIVES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

The interplay between the emergence of a regional system founded and sustained by settler communities (reflected by a white settler narrative) and the cycles of conflict, resistance and reaction which gave rise to an African opposition and liberation movements (linked to a black liberation narrative), produced a dominant narrative that shaped the politics of post-independent societies. Indeed, a *neoliberal narrative*, emerged out of the transition and reflected the growing consensus on the nature of the state and its relationship to the market, something that held profound implications for society. Each of these conflicting narratives became influential sources of policy and political action in the post-colonial period and became central to the local and regional responses to the Zimbabwean crisis as it played out.

### **2.1. The liberation narrative and the dilemmas of independence**

Dispossession of land was followed by displacement, the attack on traditional society through missionary work and civilian authorities, and all the accompanying indignities of submission to an alien culture. African nationalist movements emerged from the point of the introduction of laws dispossessing Africans from land ownership. The link between land and independence, even if clouded in sentimentality of loss, thus remained firm. These powerful images served as the mainstay for anti-colonial movements as they sought to challenge the right of white settler regimes to govern African peoples and territories. This produced a liberation narrative, claiming its legitimacy in its historical opposition to colonialism with special emphasis on the peasantry and state control.

Gaining the state was the fulfilment of decades of discontent, if not outright rebellion, within African societies. The black liberation movements successfully mobilised support from peasantry and urban masses around land question and civil rights. However, the fact of achieving and ruling underscored the modernist, anti-peasant outlook of much of the incoming leadership. As it transpired, the determination to replace the white government with a black elite was firmer than the desire to transform the socio-economic conditions of the bulk of the African population. Land restitution, once so important to liberation movements, was effectively abandoned in favour of elite transfers of resources and new ties of dependency with remaining white commercial interests. The locus of political power shifted away from the 'iron triangle' of the settler state era to one in which the urban environment was seen as the heart beat of the nation with the people in rural areas serving as reservoirs of political support to be drawn upon as dictated by need.

In this situation, the ambiguous position of white settler communities (or indeed, other recognised minorities) whether they are significantly reduced in numbers or not and retaining a relatively privileged status in the society, acts as a potent symbol of the living past. For a black elite in power that has assumed many of the trappings of the white settlers since independence, the temptation to invoke the liberation discourse is perhaps too great to avoid. Indeed, the expediency of doing so disallows one of the key features of 'nation building': what Renan (cited in Webner, 1998, p.74) has called the necessity of forgetting, that is the papering over the conflicts of the past which were in fact a seminal part of the formative process of creating the state. In this fashion, black elite accumulation fostered through control of the state is shielded behind a mask of (apparent) continuing white culpability and nefarious designs against African aspirations. The resulting liberation narrative shapes the very identity of the post-settler oligarchy and links it to a historical struggle against racism and colonialism in Africa generally. It is informed by three discourses, (i) one of solidarity (the liberation movement is the only rightful and legitimate heir to the colonial state by virtue of the struggle

and people owe it loyalty. Anything less risks a return to the colonial era); (ii) one of national identity (in guise of nation-building, the relationship between minorities and ‘authentic’ citizens is constantly redefined) and (iii) one of symbolic restitution (symbolic acts, such as changing place names, replace genuine restitution and allow for a variety of elite accumulation strategies – sometimes taking the form of affirmative action or policies of ‘Africanisation’).

With the assumption of office, the liberation movements began to engage in the building of clientalist networks and rent-seeking practices that sought to displace the racially-structured relationships of the past. Unfortunately, this approach was diametrically opposed by the dominant international narrative of neoliberalism which itself had informed the structure of the transitional arrangements in post-settler oligarchies.

## **2.2. The neoliberalist narrative and the making of the new African state**

Neoliberalism is a narrative predicated upon rationalist assumptions about the nature of the international system as state-centric and motivated by rational calculations of self-interest. Underlying the neoliberal programme is a commitment to establishing a new African state based on market principles and democratic practices. Neoliberal prescriptions deny the state a significant role in macro-economic management. Concurrently, through the application of ‘good governance’ criterion neoliberalism narrows the political sphere of action by the state to the fulfilment of facets of electoral democracy.

Neoliberalism’s influence in Africa is especially pronounced. Ever since the onset of balance of payment crises in the early 1980s, the Western donors – as individuals but most evidently through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank – have promoted radical restructuring of developing countries through the application of economic and, from the 1990s onwards, political conditionalities.

The relationship between neoliberalist narrative and the liberation narrative is one of conflict and accommodation. During the era of white settler rule, neoliberalism offered a trenchant critique of the irrationalities inherent in statutory racial exclusion of the black majority in the economy (a position that found favour amongst the liberation movement). With the coming of independence and the trend towards black majority governments pursuing clientalist practices through such policies as the expansion of public sector, neoliberalism has been at the forefront of criticism, again based upon the distorting effects that this has on the economy (a position that has found favour with the remaining white settlers). This critique has been



extended to issues of governance as Western donors have sought to deepen the commitment to democratic values in the political systems of Southern African states.

In democratic transitions, this interplay between international norms and domestic narratives, a 'two-level norm game', takes place against a backdrop of changing circumstances ('world time context') that affects dramatically state elite approaches to new norms and institutions as well as societies relationship to them. Democratic transitions, which by definition are situated between the authoritarian past and a liberal constitutional future, are only partially embedded in the sense that while the international realm has conferred legitimacy upon the new government, in the domestic setting there may be only limited or contingent acceptance of the transitional arrangements (Jackson, 1990). Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) point out that the saliency of domestic interests over international norms are at their strongest in the first phase of the norm life cycle, that is before the proverbial tipping point which initiates a norm cascade<sup>3</sup>.

But while socialisation to the international community as a key source of legitimacy, the pull of conformity and attendant search for legitimising functions can also be felt at other levels. Following Axelrod (1986), states actively seek out like-minded states ('peers') and pursue policies which demonstrate congruence with these entities as a means of enhancing their credibility with local actors as well. Sustaining that status through cultivating the relationship with other like-minded states involves trust and reciprocity, which in turn fosters elite conformity (Ostrom, 1998, p.12-13). Especially, in the non-Western case, the weakness of new institutions and practices can cause leaders to seek recourse to conformity with like-minded states as well as societal narratives whose basis in 'traditional' social structures and practices, all of which ultimately results in the decoupling of states to the nascent democratic norms which were foundational to the transition. This is what happened in Zimbabwe in the late 1990s.

### **3. ZIMBABWE AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

It was neoliberalism which proved to be both the context and the catalyst for the crisis of the post-colonial state in Southern Africa. It exposed the contradictions inherent in the post-

---

<sup>3</sup> States conform with norms at stage 2 (norm cascade) for reasons that relate to their identities as members of international society...What happens at the tipping point is that enough states and enough critical states endorse the new norm to redefine appropriate behaviour for the identity called 'state' or some relevant subset of state (such as 'liberal' state or a European state)' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p.902).

colonial state, from the prevailing economic inequalities inherited from the colonial period to the complacency and even predatory conduct that accompanied the installation of a black elite in government. Moreover it laid bare the legal constraints on government action aimed at addressing critical economic and political problems.

### **3.1. The Zimbabwean crisis**

Briefly, the crisis in Zimbabwe which has resulted in the effective collapse of the state has its roots in the history of the post-independence land settlement, contemporary economic and social policy and the particulars of Robert Mugabe's (and Zanu-PF) drive to maintain power in the face of new political challengers (Meredith, 2001). Underlying the crisis was the colonial legacy of land distribution in which 10 million hectares of the country's most viable land was owned – after nearly two decades of independence – by 4,500 mostly white commercial farmers and 18 million hectares was owned by about 850,000 black farmers in the so-called communal areas. The promised land distribution, which was predicated on the 'willing buyer and seller at market values' approach (adopted by Namibia in 1989 and South Africa after 1994) and had called for 162,000 families to be resettled on 8.3 million hectares under Phase One of the Land Reform and Resettlement Programme, had resulted in only 71,000 families being resettled on 3.5 million hectares of land by 1990. The slow pace of land acquisition by the government, its redistribution to party apparatchiks and regime favourites rather than landless peasants, all served to fuel discontent within Zimbabwean society.

At the same time, Brett (2005) describes that, by 1990, the government, industry and agriculture (the latter two still dominated by white interests) had come to the conclusion that the slowing pace of the Zimbabwean economy would only be improved through substantial structural liberalisation. In fact, the implementation of a structural adjustment programme, in conjunction with the difficulties of competing in the emergent international trading environment as well as the summary cancellation by Pretoria of a preferential trade agreement, all contributed to a contraction of the economy by 8 per cent in 1993, unemployment increasing to over 50 per cent, double-digit inflation (despite World Bank predictions that it would drop) and a collapse in social services. By 1997, growing dissent amongst public sector workers, who had borne much of the initial brunt of structural adjustment policies, was joined by veterans of the liberation struggle angry at the looting of their pensions by state officials. Shaken by protests, Mugabe re-opened the neglected land issue and proposed restitution through expropriation as a solution to the country's economic ailments. The hasty convening of an international donor conference in Harare in September

1998 seemed to offer a credible route to resolving Zimbabwe's land disparities. Funding amounting to Z\$7.4 million was pledged to purchase 118 farms but the inception phase never happened due to conditions of transparency imposed by donors. Furthermore, following the disclosure of irregularities in national accounting designed to underplay the costs of a declining economy and a military intervention in Congo, brought about a suspension of IMF loans of US\$193 million and US\$140 million.

In the wake of continued economic hardship, opposition political forces began to coalesce and in September 1999 the leader of the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), Morgan Tsvangirai, prominent trade union activists, and some white business interests came together to form a new party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). However, after the ending of the Lancaster House constitutional proscriptions on mandatory white parliamentary representation in 1990, various attempts were made by Mugabe to alter aspects as to further entrench Zanu-PF rule through the creation of a one-party state which ultimately failed. A referendum to change the constitution was introduced in February 2000. Contrary to expectations, 55.9% of Zimbabweans polled, the majority urban based and anti-Mugabe supports, rejected the government-sponsored referendum

Nevertheless, after the June 2000 parliamentary elections (in which the MDC, despite intimidation and the death of over thirty of its supporters, won 57 seats to Zanu-PF's 62 seats), Mugabe began to take aim at the independent judiciary that had been an obstacle to realising the ambitions to 'accelerated' land redistribution and increased the pace of land invasions. Opportunistic politicians, like the former government critic Jonathan Moyo, joined Mugabe in using the land issue to mobilise the simmering rural discontent – accentuated by economic privations – and, concurrently, stifle opposition voices by invoking the language of liberation. The land invasions continued unabated and Mugabe's decree ordered in November 2001 1000 farmers to leave their land within three months.

### ***3.2. The Regional Response***

The ex-settler states of South Africa and Namibia acted with a curious mix of equivocation, fear and support for the Zimbabwean government actions. South African president Thabo Mbeki articulated a policy of constructive engagement (called 'quiet diplomacy') which sought to encourage Mugabe privately on the path to reform while publicly proclaiming support for his actions (Schoeman and Alden, 2003). Zimbabwe was South Africa's largest trading partner in Africa. The imposition of economic sanctions would impose high costs on South African businesses operating in the country and there was serious concern that a

destabilised Zimbabwe would ignite refugee flows and greater economic chaos across the region (Africa Institute, 2001). Namibia, whose direct ties with the Zimbabwean economy were far fewer, nonetheless was linked through its close monetary and trade links to South Africa. Its president, Sam Nujoma, had a close personal relationship with Mugabe and this contributed to Namibia's support for Zimbabwean intervention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1998.

At the SADC level, despite differences behind the scenes (especially at the August 2001 SADC summit in Blantyre), regional solidarity marked the collective response to the Zimbabwean crisis in its initial phase<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, Mugabe began to speak openly at SADC summits of mobilizing the black population of neighbouring states to launch their own land occupations of white-owned commercial farms, raising the spectacle of economic disruption and political strife across the region. His most notable articulation of this was his vitriolic attack on the British government in front of world leaders at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. The Chief of Zimbabwe's Defence Force, General Vitalis Zvinvashe, openly declared he would not be willing to serve under a president who had not been part of the liberation struggle, a position criticized by SADC leaders (Human Rights Watch, 2005). The rapturous receptions Mugabe and other top Zanu-PF officials received at gatherings around the region, including South Africa and Namibia, underscored his growing popularity with African audiences. Mashabela (2002) declared at the WSSD summit that Mugabe was 'speaking for black people worldwide'.

The ramifications of the Zimbabwean crisis for the domestic situation in the former settler states were considerable (Lahiff and Cousins, 2001). Land activists, from the Transkei Land Services Organisation to the Landless Peoples Movement in South Africa to Namibian NGO and trade unionists, used the spectacle in Zimbabwe to raise questions about the continuing

---

<sup>4</sup> A meeting between Mugabe and the leaders of South Africa and Mozambique in April 2000 ended with Mbeki and Joaquim Chissano proclaiming solidarity with the Zimbabwean leader (even when privately voicing their concerns). Nujoma was consistently supportive of Mugabe's analysis of the origins of the crisis – colonial legacies and neo-imperialism – and the measures adopted by Zanu-PF to combat these factors. During the build up to Zimbabwe's presidential elections of March 2002, South African officials sought to address the issue in the regional SADC setting, the continental forum of the Organization of African Unity, and internationally through the Commonwealth and the United Nations. Following the UN's Millennium 2000 Summit, where Mbeki committed the government to play a role as intermediary between the international financial institutions and Zimbabwe at the behest of Kofi Annan, South African officials secured IMF support for a financial package to cover some of the costs of a land redistribution programme envisaged at a 1998 UN Development Programme conference. Britain itself was induced to pledge US\$57 million towards the process, but again the agreement fell apart as Harare refused to be moved on the issue of 'law and order' and transparency. There was a last effort to resolve the land question in advance of the Zimbabwean presidential elections at a meeting in Abuja, Nigeria in September 2001 under the auspices of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group which promised British financial support for land reform and its results were swiftly endorsed by five SADC presidents.

inequities in land distribution in their countries. Many regional NGOs, who responded with a critical review of their own situations to Moyo's comments criticising their inaction (Moyo, cited in Mwengo, 1999, p.7), moved to embrace a more aggressive public stance on the topic in future. New measures that they committed themselves to included 'stimulating a faster pace of land reforms by exerting pressure on government and policy makers' as well as 'influencing donors and other foreign interests to support land reform and redistribution processes' (Mwengo, 1999, p.42). In Namibia, the Namibian National Farmers Union (NNFU), the Namibian NGO Forum (Nangof) and the National Union of Namibian Workers organised a march on parliament to protest the slow pace of land reform as well as their exclusion from consultation on proposed legislation on communal land rights<sup>5</sup>. After a visit to Zimbabwe in April 2000, the NNFU and Nangof were able to call upon the Zimbabwean experience as a stark warning to the government and the white commercial farmers that land reform was imperative to stability in Namibia, declaring, 'Let us keep in mind that today is Zimbabwe and tomorrow could be Namibia.'<sup>6</sup>.

The initial reaction of the South African and Namibian governments to this renewed local critique was defensive, denying the failure of their established land reform programmes to address inequalities inherited from the past and emphasising the importance of retaining the constitutional guarantees on property. With the lack of substantive progress on land and agrarian reform<sup>7</sup>, both governments experienced a rising tide of protest both within and outside ruling circles. In South Africa, where the reaction to the Zimbabwean crisis had been more divided, growing pressure within the ANC to take a harder line against Mugabe had been a feature of the public debate since the middle of 2000<sup>8</sup>. But, at the same time, contrary expressions of support within the party were much in evidence. For example, Kgalema Motlanthe, ANC Secretary General, declared that Zimbabwe's land occupations were a 'protest action' and that the land imbalance in that country was 'immoral' (cited in Lahiff and Cousins, 2001, p.655). The popularity of Zanu-PF amongst ANC party rank and file was clearly illustrated by the cheers which greeted Emmerson Mnangagwa, at that time Mugabe

---

<sup>5</sup> *The Namibian*, 8 September 1999, [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

<sup>6</sup> Press statement released by the Namibian National Farmers Union and Namibian NGO Forum, 24 May 2000.

<sup>7</sup> In South Africa, over 84% (out of the 87%) of agricultural land remained in the hands of white owners, leaving in the words of activists, the apartheid-era land ownership imbalance virtually unchanged (Anseeuw, 2004). Between 1994 and 1999 only 5000 of an estimated 63,500 land restitution claims had been settled by the government. In Namibia, where 3,800 white commercial farmers owned 80% of the arable land, as little progress was made on agrarian reform. By 2001, only 97 commercial farms (totalling 568,821 hectares) had been acquired for resettlement and 1,964 black families resettled.

<sup>8</sup> The ANC's alliance partners, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party, became increasingly vocal in their criticism of spiral of violence and attacks on Zimbabwean trade unions and the media (Irin, 2001).

chosen successor, at the annual ANC party congress in 2002<sup>9</sup>. The composition of the MDC, led by black trade unionists and white agricultural interests, mirrored in broad terms (potentially) discontented factions within South Africa and Namibia's own political landscape: there was a visceral reaction within ANC and Swapo circles against legitimising the MDC over the interests of a fellow liberation movement.

In the end, the power of the critique levelled by local activists (echoed if not articulated by Mugabe), coupled to the pressure to demonstrate tangible progress on land reform since independence, contributed to the two governments' review of their policies. Both the ANC and Swapo acknowledged the shortcomings of the market-based approach to reform, a key component of the historic compromise which ushered in the transition to democracy. As a result, government expropriation became formally introduced and implemented to pressure reluctant white farmers to put their land up for sale. In South Africa, Mbeki committed to transforming black ownership of farmland to 30% of all land by 2015 and increased by the finances available to the Department of Land Affairs to purchase farms as well as legal tools to speed expropriation. In Namibia, despite inflammatory language by Nujoma, the emphasis on due process was continually underscored by the government as it sought to resettle the estimated 240,000 landless Namibians.

### **3.3. Enduring Economies, Conflicting Ideas and Decoupling Norms**

Ex-settler oligarchies did not consolidate their democracies more easily than other African transitional states – which had been widely expected by transitologists – and exhibited instead backsliding towards neo-patrimonial practices or even authoritarianism for a number of reasons. In the first instance, this was due to the fact that the transitional arrangements put into place a liberal constitutional regime that did not address the underlying structures of settler colonialism. SADC states, despite periods of criticism of Mugabe's actions and their ensuing impact on the region, invariably couched their collective statements in language which reaffirmed their shared identity as liberation movements and victims of colonialism. Even Southern Africa's civil society actors, despite a diversity of national experiences and general distrust of government, were able to draw upon the common thread of colonialism and land dispossession by settler communities to reaffirm their shared identity and definition of the regional dimensions of the land question (Mwengo, 2000). It situated the new state in relation to largely domestic rural societies with traditionalist outlooks and fellow independent

---

<sup>9</sup> *Mail and Guardian*, 26 April 2003, [www.mg.co.za](http://www.mg.co.za).

states in the region, building upon common sources of legitimacy that were fostered through the operational norm of regional solidarity.

The internalisation of new norms, which Linz and Stepan (1996) considered to be the third measure of genuine consolidation, was deemed to be non-problematic for ex-settler oligarchies by transitologists due to the basic acceptance of democratic and market practices by these predecessor regimes. However, this did not take into account the possibility that norm diffusion could be more apparent than real. For instance, norm congruence ('grafting') considered crucial to introducing and gaining acceptance of new norms, may allow for a temporal proximity between two norms and even an appearance of norm acceptance (Acharia, 2003). Norm conflict re-emerged in times of crisis (the 'tipping point') and, in the context of the structural challenges to power which the land issue raised, could see political regimes jettison aspects of liberal-constitutionalism in favour of societally-grounded norms whose saliency ensured greater political support. Far from inspiring a norm cascade, crisis at this phase in a new democracy might inspire *norm de-coupling* that shed the nascent ideas and constitutive institutions for the stability offered by pre-existing norms. As the Zimbabwean crisis developed, it exposed the limitations of the liberal-constitutional regime put into place by the democratic transition – both in that country itself and its fellow ex-settler oligarchies to the South – and brought about serious alteration or even abandonment of the constitutive norms based on neo-liberalism.

Exacerbating this weak embeddedness of new democratic ideals within Southern Africa has been the elite character of transition itself. Negotiated in the name of their constituencies by externally recognised parties who achieved this status usually through recourse to non-democratic armed political action (be it liberation movement or settler government), the perspectives which ultimately influenced elite decision-making on the structuring of post-independence institutions did not necessarily represent either the perspectives of broader peasant-dominated societies nor did it always reflect the assertion of democratic ideals. In this way post-independent governing elites found themselves not only beneficiaries but defenders of institutions and practices derived from the transition without necessarily sharing their underlying values. The end result of this process was that the transition to majority rule allowed for the co-existence of two narratives – triumph of liberation and triumph of neo-liberalism – whose contingent nature and contradictions were not apparent to transitologists. Democracy had triumphed, as proven by the overwhelmingly electoral support new governments earned, but the conditions for consolidation were only partially in place.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Following from the incorporation of the literature on norms, the article extrapolates upon transnational norms as an important tool for divining the role of regional dynamics in shaping formal institutions and informal practices. The impact of the wash of ideas emanating from Zimbabwe that swept across former settler states, exposing unexpected fissures in Namibia and South Africa, held influence for governments and societies alike is precisely due to the inter-relationship between regional and domestic norms.

While the trigger of the crisis in Zimbabwe may have been challenges posed by neoliberalism to the post-colonial state, the conflict as played out in the region itself came to be centred on the issue of land. The public airing of the long buried land question in independent states tapped into societally grounded narratives that inspired political entrepreneurs and inadvertently began to bring pressure to bear on these same governments. This was particularly the case with Zimbabwe, which led the way within the region in using the land issue as a counter to the challenges posed by neoliberalism. Concurrently, and here Zimbabwe again was at the regional forefront, the crisis inspired by neoliberalism provided a rationale for political opportunists to review and reinterpret the key features of the post-colonial state established by the transition from settler oligarchy.

### **References:**

- Acharya, A., 2003. How Ideas Spread – Whose Norms Matter? Norm localization and institutional change in Asian regionalism, *International Organization*, 58(2): 239-275.
- Africa Institute, 2001. Report on the Africa Institute of SA Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe, Pretoria, April.
- Aggarwal V., 1998. Reconciling Multiple Institutions: Bargaining, institutions and nesting. In Aggarwal V. (eds), *Institutional Designs for a Complex World*. Syracuse: Cornell University Press.
- Anseu, W., 2004. La réforme foncière en Afrique du Sud, des résultats peu convaincants. In Guillaume, P., Pejout, N. & Wa Kabwe-Segatti, A. (eds), *L'Afrique du Sud dix ans apres – Transition accomplie ?*. Paris: Karthala, pp.129-151.
- Axelrod R., 1986. An Evolutionary Approach to Norms, *American Political Science Review*, 80(4):1095-1111.
- Bratton M. & Van de Walle, N., 1994. Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa. *World Politics*, 46:453-489.



- Brett E.A., 2005. From Corporatism to Liberalisation in Zimbabwe: economy policy regimes and political crisis (1980-1997). Working Paper No. 58, Crisis States Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, January 2005, p.10.
- Cortell A. & Davis J., 1996. How Do International Institutions Matter? The domestic impact of international norms and rules, *International Studies Quarterly*, 40(4):451-478.
- Finnemore M. & Sikkink K., 1998. International Norm Dynamics and Political Change, *International Organization*, 52(4):887-917..
- Dunn K., 2001. Madlib #32: the (blank) African State: rethinking the sovereign state in international relations theory. In Dunn K. & Shaw T. (eds). *Africa's Challenge to International Relations Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Gill G., 2000. *The Dynamics of Democratization: elites, civil society and the transition process*. New York: St Martins.
- Gourevitch P., 1978. The Second Image Reversed: the international sources of domestic politics, *International Organization*, 32(4):881-911.
- Hartley A., 2003. Mugabe is their Darling, *Spectator Magazine UK*, [www.rhodesian.net](http://www.rhodesian.net) (25th October 2003).
- Human Rights Watch, 2005. Not a Level Playing Field: Zimbabwe's parliamentary elections in 2005. HRW Briefing Paper, 21 March 2005, [www.hrw.org/background/africa/zimbabwe/0305/](http://www.hrw.org/background/africa/zimbabwe/0305/).
- IRIN, 2001, 'Southern Africa: News Briefs . IRIN-SA@irin.org.za, 14 March 2001.
- Jackson R., (1990). *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krasner S., 1983. *International Regimes*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kratochwil F. & Ruggie J.G., 1986. International Organization: A State of the Art on the Art of the State, *International Organization*, 40(4):753-775.
- Lahiff, E. & Cousins, B., 2001. The Land Crisis in Zimbabwe Viewed from South of the Limpopo, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 1(4):652-666.
- Mashabela H., 2002. Zimbabwean land reform: implications, , Helen Suzmann Foundation, Focus, Vol.31 ([www.hsf.org.za/%23articledatabase/article\\_view](http://www.hsf.org.za/%23articledatabase/article_view)).
- Meredith, M., 2001. *Mugabe: power and plunder in Zimbabwe*. Oxford: BBS.
- Mozaffar S., Scarritt J. & Galaich G., 2003. Electoral Institutions, Ethnopolitical Cleavages and Party Systems in Africa's Emerging Democracies, *American Political Science Review*, 97(3):379-390.
- Mwaura, P. (1998). Namibia moves cautiously on land deals', *Africa Recovery* 12:3 December 1998, p.12
- Mwengo, 1999. Sub-Regional Reflection Forum: NGO Action on Land in Southern Africa. Workshop Report, 15-18 November 1999, p.42.

- Mwengo, 2000. Sub-Regional Reflection Forum: NGO Action on Land in Southern Africa', Workshop Report, 3-5 July 2000, p.31.
- Ostrom E., 1998. A Behaviourist Approach to a Rational Choice Theory of Collective Action, *American Political Science Review*, 92(1):1-22.
- Schoeman M. & Alden C., 2003. The Hegemon that Wasn't: South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe, *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 25(1):1-28.
- Risse-Kappen T., 1994. Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational coalitions, domestic structures and the end of the Cold War, *International Organization*, 48(2):185-214.
- Werbner, R. 1998. Smoke from the Barrel of a Gun: postwars of the dead, memory and reinscription in Zimbabwe. In Werbner, R (ed). *Memory and Post-colony: African anthropology and the critique of power*. London: Zed.